THE

TWILIGHT DRUMMERS

ND OTHER SKETCHES

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The Twilight Drummers

and Other Sketches

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Twilight Drummers

and Other Sketches

By Ashley Gibson

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TO

MARJORIE

WHO CENSURED ONE

AND WILL NEVER READ THE OTHERS

THESE SKETCHES ARE

DEDICATED

The majority of these fugitive papers have for occult reasons (not clear but in the result none the less pleasing to the author) escaped rejection at one time or another by the editors of some half a dozen periodicals.

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The Twilight Drummers

The Twilight Drummers

OMEWHERE down by the Line there is a grove of palm trees clustered about a little tumbling stream. One reaches it by a rambling path of red earth, beaten flat and polished by countless native feet. Right up above the path hangs the sun, and to travel by that road is a great weariness, so that it is pleasant to find one's self, as the day draws to its close, treading the cool, green aisles of the grove. Some of the palms are tall and slender, like the women of that country, but the dwarf, damp-loving kind grows thickly in many spots about the margin of the brook. Silk cottonwoods and bananas are there, too, and curious exotic plants for which the unlearned have no names, and a tangle of brushwood, strangely green ; and all about are

creeping parasitic growths spun hither and thither, a verdant cobweb, linking up a thousand points of the grove.

Those who are skilled in wood lore will be aware that the path runs through the grove, but it is hard indeed to follow. Like many an African track, it is more easily felt than seen, and the wanderer's feet will lead him in safety where his eyes would play him false.

* * * * * *

When I first came upon the grove I traced the path, after many divagations, as far as the brook. Here, on its bank, were vestiges of a track, repeated on the further side. Here, too, the pebbly bed of the brook was visible throughout its width, for this was a ford that the black people had used for generations. Beyond, where a tree had fallen half athwart it, the channel twisted suddenly, and the swirling flood grew opaque and forbidding. I turned towards the corner when halfway across the ford, where the stream came barely

to my knees, and quickly the waters piled themselves about me to the waist.

There was something menacing in the embrace of the current, which was very cold, and I pressed back to the ford and climbed out upon the farther bank. The stream, here at its widest, was no more than six yards across, an inconsiderable obstacle enough.

From this point the fretful noise of water pulling and sucking at the roots of the fallen tree seemed louder.

It chanced that here a great rock of granite jutted from the soft rich earth, and on one corner of this I sat and rested. At my feet a large butterfly fluttered indolently from one dead branch to another. Its wings were of a shade closely akin to that of the decaying wood over which it hovered, a brownish yellow, with patches of pale nacreous blue.

It was while I rested that I heard the drummers.

* * * * * *

The Twilight Drummers

Grove and forest in the tropics know few sounds till after sunset. At midday you may hear a leaf falling, if you should halt to listen. At times there will be a rustling in the branches high above you, a half-caught glimpse of goblin forms swinging through the tree-tops, a half-heard echo of sibilant querulous chattering. Or you may be startled by the harsh, metallic call of an unseen bird, like the clanging of a barbaric gong. Sound of any kind is so unusual that when it comes it is necessarily disturbing. After sundown, as is known, things are otherwise.

I say that it was by the brook that I first became conscious of the drums. It was possible, of course, that they had been sounding their warning—or was it, perhaps, their invitation—ever since I had entered the shadowy cloister of the grove. One knows how the consciousness will leap suddenly to recognition of the ticking of the clock above the hearth, or the far-away thunder of breakers on a sea coast.

Who these hidden drummers might be, I was not able then or afterwards to judge. They were ahead of me, so much was certain, but the path faded away to nothingness almost at my feet, and try as I might I could not win through the matted thicket that confronted me. Intinctively I felt that their drumming was in some way connected with myself. They had chosen, perhaps, this means to draw me to them, and when I, having with unimaginable struggles reached the further edge of the grove, should meet them face to face, they would become silent on the instant, or their drumming would perhaps rise in a rhythmic and terrible crescendo to a climax of diabolic sound. Again, that drumming might have a message for me which it was beyond my power to interpret. It had already occured to me that these hidden ones might be striving to prevent my going farther, lest some great mischance befel me. Or, again, their

drumming might be merely an attempt to thwart me on the brink of an immense discovery.

But I could not find the path, and so journeyed homewards in the dusk. Before me flew one of those ghostly russet-hued birds, relatives, I think, of our nightjar, that flit along every African path at sunset. What seemed a stick or a stone rises at your feet, flutters a dozen yards along the track, and settles in the dust, rises again and settles, in exasperating repetition.

* * * * * *

Twice or thrice afterwards I visited the grove, and when I had forded the stream and found the rock it was always close upon sunset. And the drummers were always at their task.

Once only I saw a man in the grove. He was a native of meek aspect, bearing a a basket of roots upon his head. He was following by the path I had taken, and when

he saw me seated on the rock he was so surprised that he fell into the stream. He scrambled backed to safety, smiled a shy, meek smile, and was absorbed again into the green gloom of the trees. But he went back, not forward.

I walked away from the grove the last time with the sound of drums reverberating in my ears more loudly, more insistently than before.

And they were still beating there on the day when I set my face resolutely westward, towards the great river and the coast.

An African Night

An African Night

E talked not at all, my friend and I, as we ate our evening meal in an island of light set upon a sea of darkness that, though silent, was none the less alive. Yet it was not an utter darkness, for circumscribing us, nearer the ground, only to be discerned by a concentrated staring through the surrounding envelope of gloom, a myriad points caught the light, intermittently, and for the fraction of a second. We were not alone. These tiny reflectors were a thousand human eyes. It was a little disquieting, this thought that we should be feeding, performing necessary but absurd antics with knives and forks and glasses beneath the quiet scrutiny of a whole urban population. Once, from far back, there came a shrill high-pitched cackle of laughter that

was almost derisive, but ere we fully realized that someone had laughed the night had caught the sound, enveloped it and smothered it.

We essayed, as I have said, no conversation, my companion having foreknowledge that in an hour or so he would be lying with hot eyes beneath mosquito nets unfluttered by any breeze, wrapped tightly in all the blankets that our scanty kit could furnish, yet shivering from head to foot. Had I spoken I knew that he would not have answered, save with an oath. On the table at his elbow stood a little squre bottle of glass that held quinine tablets.

The small clear flame of the lamp, burning with steadiness though unshielded by shade or chimney, seemed the pivot upon which this sinister world of the African night hung poised. One's ears, preternaturally acute, sensed the faint whir of the clockwork apparatus which fed that tiny cone of light with air. There was a louder and more sibi-

lant whirring, the plop of a small object striking an obstacle, and the flame, hitherto impassive, immovable, flickered to the blind flutterings of some maimed creature of the darkness. It fell to the table, whatever it was, a hideous nightmare huddle of lobster claws, bloated body, and shrivelled glistening wings. It was but the forerunner of a horde of hellish things. Fantastic demons of faëry, out of the blackness they hurled themselves by scores to immolation in that calm and deadly pyramid of fire. Over the whole compass of the table they crawled and wriggled with obscene crippled movements. At the sight I was filled with a deadly nausea.

A black shadow hovered at my companion's side, offering a cup. He took it, tasted the coffee, and dashed what remained to the ground. Gripping the arms of his chair, he snarled and made as if to rise, but the shadow was gone, suddenly and mysteriously, as it had appeared. The tired eyes of the figure

in the chair glared like those of a predatory animal.

Still neither of us spoke, The silence seemed unbroken till one listened intently, when it became evident that all the night was filled with an unholy concert of subdued sound. Far off beyond the huts a million cicadas were shrilling in every patch of bush ; out of the reeds came the fluting of tree-frogs; and from the water beyond, a quarter of a mile away, was borne the sonorous and foreboding music of the bull-frogs. Mosquitoes filled the air immediately about us with their thin trumpeting. The lamp-light fell on my compainion's wrist, and I saw him look on with apathy while one of them settled there and slowly, with fiendish deliberation, worked its poison-laden spear through the skin to the pulsing vein beneath.

I reached over for the square glass bottle.

* * * * * *

Another light appeared, tossing upon the back-ground of gloom. It was the hurricane-

lamp carried by my boy, who now sought to guide me to the hut where he had set up my bed. My friend had gone, cursing the frightened youth who led him. In ten minutes I was prone on my camp mattress, in thin pyjamas and bare of any blanket. I lay and gazed towards the doorless aperture of my hut. Through the veil of mosquito-netting I could perceive against the sky the fretted outline of a mango tree whose dry leaves never rustled, for there was still no faintest suggestion of wind. Sleep was impossibly, infinitely, remote.

With a suddenness that sent a stab of pain racing along my nerves, a wailing unearthly cry rose to heaven from some distant quarter of the town. One of the Faithful was calling on his God, and as the modulations of his praying rose and fell in mournful gradations of sound I pictured the white-clad swaying figure rhythmically

prostrating and uprearing itself like a pallid wave of the sea.

* * * * * *

A single star glimmered above the mango tree.

The Mussulman's prayer had died away long ago in a last ululation of agonized self-abasement. Sometimes a bat or a lizard rustled in the thatch. Once a week-old kidling, straying from its dam, tottered through the doorway, and wandered round the hut bleating faintly and piteously till it blundered into freedom again. The minutes, or hours—I knew not which—went by.

My eyes were on the star winking above the mango tree, when it went out. The tree itself, the neighbouring hut, a row of water jars, stole into definition. Somewhere near a faint hissing sound became audible.

* * * * * *

The boys had lit my stove.

Green Havens

Green Havens

INE proved to be a big canoe, with high squared ends, roughly carved, and fairly water-tight for all its score of old leaks that had been patched and cobbled and then finished with rude native rivets of iron and copper. Suleiman and Adamu were straight, long-limbed lads, whose shoulder-muscles flickered and rippled as they strove against the Niger current; Suleiman, who was singing when he was not laughing, with a twenty-foot pole; Adamu, who was a little the elder and of a turn inclined to melancholy, with a paddle whose blade was fashioned like a spear-head.

Our rate of progression up-stream was, I take it, between one and two miles an hour, certainly no more. To attempt the open water

would have been impossible, and our best results were achieved by wriggling, like some strange amphibian, through the thin belt of reeds that fringed the river's eastern boundary. When there were no reeds we clung to the branches of those trees that lifted their crests above the flood, and pulled ourselves along hand-over-hand. Because the rains had not yet come to an end there were many such trees. Where both these and the reeds failed us, we indulged in wild bursts of frantic paddling. Suleiman, shipping his pole hastily with much splashing and commotion, would snatch up the second paddle, and Adamu and he together would grapple with and overcome, inch by inch, the inimical expanse of moving water that struggled ever to push us back from the next green haven.

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It had been the appearance of these two boys on the river bank that led me ultimately to engage them. They were tall and nobly

built ; their gestures were as easy and graceful as the movements of wild animals; they had the regular features of the majority of their tribe. Their eyes and teeth were magnificent, and the rich chocolate of each face was in admirable contrast with the snow-white of the new-washed Phrygian cap and flowing burnous. After his tussle with an eddy beyond a fallen tree, Suleiman shed that eminently becoming robe. Here also he began to sing that ballad of his native land whose only words were, or seemed to be,

" Ah tete yang bala'hur."

This ditty, which to judge by its intonation was a mournful one, for the singer managed to convey a haunting and delicate note of sadness into every repetition of it, was pitched in a high but not shrill falsetto, repeated with infinite variations in a minor key. The vocalist relieved the dolour of his singing by bursting from time to time into half-unconscious gurgles of merriment, like those of a young

child. This would happen when anything essentially ridiculous took place, as when the breaking of a branch lost us, with a jerk, ten yards of our hard-won passage, or again when a large bird that I had foolishly shot at fell fluttering clumsily into the tide and could not be retrieved.

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Without his burnous Suleiman appeared to even better advantage. He was a bronze gladiator come to life. The touch of the sun on my own forearm, already tanned to mahogany, set me wondering at his hardihood. Yet what seemed brown satin was surely more like leather, and now the excessively becoming little cap of liberty was doffed as well, disclosing a chocolate pate that was shaved as cleanly as my chin. Could a native, I pondered, have sunstroke in any conceivable circumstances? Apparently not, or in any case there seemed to be a preventive remedy, as demonstrated by the behaviour of Suleiman,

who now bent to snatch a palmful of river water wherewith to splash his shining crown. Which done, he emitted a grunt of satisfaction, a *sotto voce* grunt, restrained to the point of genteelness, and resumed his song.

Then, with nothing visible or audible around and ahead of us but the reeds whispering in the sun, we stopped. We seemed not to have grounded, we merely ceased from going on, as might be in surrender to some occult natural force that forbade our advancing farther. Adamu, roused from his melancholy dream, intimated respectfully that I should step overboard and proceed to that village where I wished to lodge. It lay, if not precisely near at hand, at least not so far but that we might reach it by nightfall. I asked him how this should be managed, and he suggested that I might find it convenient to ride upon his own broad shoulders. I did so, and in five minutes we found a path of hard red earth, at whose extremity hovered several brown and

shameless children and an old woman, equally shameless, but of a corporeal hue that was rather grey than brown.

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It was decided that this dame, who now revealed herself as the mother of Suleiman's brother, should go forward with her relative and my loads to make ready a hut and prepare food in the village against my coming, and that I, attended by Adamu, should follow at my leisure. So by a little creek I rested me under a grove of red bananas, and watched the passage of a string of native girls, who carried on their heads grass baskets filled with the produce of the neighbouring yam field. They walked with the supple ease of panthers, and as they came upon me suddenly at the bend in the path they shied like frightened wild things, throwing back to their fellows timid little half cries of surprise.

Then I passed on, and came at last to the clustered huts of red mud. One was bigger

than the rest, and before it stood Suleiman smiling a welcome, and a bowing figure that seemed to carry more clothes than were altogether suitable. Suleiman explained, deferentially, that I was in luck. White men seldom came here now, but long ago they had built this God-palaver house, whose native sacristan, still in charge, was anxious to do all the honours. The clothed figure came forward, still bowing. Its English was almost intelligible. I was ushered courteously into the cool, dark interior of the mission hut.

On its main wall were exhibited three European pictures. That in the middle was a crude German oleograph depicting the apostle John attired in a red dressing-gown. His supporters, I noticed, were two well-known actresses of the Gaiety Theatre.

El Dorado

El Dorado

F it was there at all the reef lay somewhere within the stretch of country between the blue hills and the river, a tract, I should say, twenty miles long by ten broad. Just about where we stood the swamp began and the river ended, though there was no definite line of separation. Behind us that immense bulk of brown water swirled away westwards. It was two miles wide, and because of the long tongues of sandbank that broke up its oily surface it had taken us three hours to cross.

In getting thus far we had spent many weary weeks. We had waded through creeks and sweated along scorched bush-paths; we had kept ourselves alive on bad food and bad water. We had ceased to regard any of the amenities of life. Secretly each one of us had

grown to suspect his comrades. And the Government at headquarters had wired frantically to forbid our entering this province at all. They had thought we should be more troublesome in our deaths than in our lives. But we had laughed at the telegrams.

Having passed many days in that tract of country I have cause to remember it very vividly. So, I imagine, have Dale and Hewitt, if they are alive.

All I can tell you about Dale is that he was a long, lean, bronzed adventurer. Hewitt called himself a mining engineer, but I do not think that describes him very well.

Between us and the blue cliffs on the horizon the land undulated in a succession of rocky ridges and grey-green valleys. I remember that distances were immensely deceptive there. You could perceive a clump of trees hours before you reached it. One reedy crest held you from the desired shade of those green boughs, but, having topped that, there

fell away before you another long and weary dip of yellow path rising ultimately to a further ridge, and beyond that yet another. And it was a thirsty land. I have never craved for water as I craved for it there, never dragged heavy feet along tracks so shadeless and so cruel, never rushed so eagerly to throw myself beside some sluggish trickle and swallow pint after pint of water that was more than half mud.

Yet there were many prospects of that country that were pleasant to the eye. Even now I can conjure up at will the vision of a path that sloped away from one's feet to a crystal streamlet creeping musically among granite rocks, beneath an overhanging tangle of twisted palms and luscious fern-like growths. Beyond was rolling grassy ground scattered with mimosa bush, and through the shimmering air that danced above it in the heat the far-off hills showed more richly blue than before, a blue that was almost lapis-lazuli. The sands

of the stream were all golden, and the little fish that hung and darted there had large golden eyes. And the sun was everywhere, so strong and bright that the colours of all objects seemed alive and glowing with a strange inward fire.

In the branches of a tree by the stream sat a bright green bird. At intervals it screamed harshly.

* * * * * *

By a little reed-fringed gully Dale and I sat on an outcrop of some basaltic rock and listened to the words of Hewitt, who read from a paper on his knee. The man who wrote it is dead, and this story is not concerned with the manner of its coming into our possession.

Three hundred yards E. of the village of Ongbe I struck a reef of conglomerate running N.-E. and S.-W. A week's surveying showed that it was traceable for five miles, from the ridge of low hills to the point where it strikes the river. The reef crops out again on an

Island in the main channel, where I found the natives wearing gold ornaments on the wrists and ankles. Samples of rock panned by me on the spot showed a proportionate yield of 15 to 20 dwts.

* * * * * *

All that day and the next we three tramped steadily beneath the blazing sun. Before us strode an impassive negro youth, balancing on his head two iron pans, a score of white canvas bags with numbers on them, and a small sampling pick. A younger lad, almost an infant, bore a heavy pestle and mortar of wrought-iron.

From time to time we came to spots where the rock thrust its jagged teeth up through the soil. They were of all kinds and colours, and the dry channels about were strewn with gravel. There were quartz pebbles, white, yellow, and an exquisite rose-pink. There was a hard greenish stone like fine granite, and another that Hewitt said was porphyry. There was gneiss and sandstone.

Scattered here and there on the ground were small crystalline formations of black stone that reminded me of sugar-candy. Hewitt tapped busily with the little pick, and soon all the canvas bags were full.

When we got back to our camp by the stream we set the boys going with the pestle and mortar. "Beating stones" they found not altogether unattractive, though it was folly on our part to have come so far when excellent stones abounded on the other side of the river.

Afterwards, perhaps a dozen times, we made pilgrimages to the stream, to watch Hewitt swirling the water and the powdered rock round and about in the pan. But at the end there was never a gleam of yellow.

At our meal that second night Hewitt grumbled rather more than we did. We had all grumbled equally up to now, but that evening for some reason Dale and I felt almost cheerful. After all, we had got to the place at

last. And really two days' disappointment signified nothing. It might take months.

"You chaps," snarled Hewitt, "what do you know? Nothing. Don't you try to teach me. If anything pulls this business through its going to be my expert knowledge. And don't you forget it."

And he lit his pipe and went out in the dusk and sulked.

The next morning there was a far-away look in his eyes. His manner was a little constrained. He suggested that we should all now strike out in different directions and bring back in the evening those samples that we had collected. Dale and I got back with our boys staggering under the chippings we had amassed. Hewitt seemed not to have done very much. His expert knowledge had at least saved him from carting rubbish about. The pilgrimages to the stream were repeated, and there was no glint of yellow yet.

Dale and I collected, in the course of the

following day, enough samples to ballast a liner. But it appeared that Hewitt had taken a gun and gone out shooting guinea-fowl. He now sat in the open door-way of the hut with his mouth half open, gazing at the setting sun with lack-lustre eyes. They had the same far-away look in them. I do not know what he saw, but I think it was his people's home at Sydenham, or a girl perhaps.

We hoped he had not got fever.

"No," he said, "but I've had enough of this, you chaps. I've spent too many years of my life roughing it and putting up with hardships—all this sort of thing. I'm older than you. And—I've got no faith in this rotten mine."

"Do you want to go home?" I asked.

"Yes," he said.

Then Dale, who had always a hot temper and a fiery tongue, stood up and cursed him, elaborately and at very great length. The intensity of his anger turned the tan of his

face to grey, and brought a sob into his voice. His outburst was so sudden, so unexpected, that when he ceased it was difficult to be certain that someone had been speaking. Yet a faint echo of those lashing, searing words seemed still to be ringing in the air about us.

Hewitt gasped, and his jaw dropped. He stood up and walked out of the hut. Before dawn he had gone.

* * * * * *

I have never seen him since.

The Resthouse

The Resthouse

WAS not a little glad when the narrow path turned sharply, and the conical thatched roofs and mud walls of Kerefi lay revealed, nestling at the foot of a high sandstone bluff. Beyond Kerefi, I knew, lay the great river, and eight hours' canoeing on the down current would take me to the big station, big in the sense that three and sometimes four white men of the Government services were gathered there together ; and fairly on my way home from a year's tour in which ill-health and the strange depression of spirit that weighs upon every white man whose work keeps him twelve consecutive months in West Africa had left their mark.

The grass, if grass it could be called that was three times my own height, ceased at the edge of a meagre patch of cultivation. Beyond

the strip of yams and mealies, vocal with the muffled stridence of calling guinea-fowl, the bush encroached again, throwing forward skirmishers, isolated tussocks of tall dry grass that coalesced and ran together up the outlying spur of the bluff crowned by the old Government resthouse.

There it was that I meant to lay my head that night.

Even as the carriers, panting from the final short ascent, set down their loads in the end of its wide verandah, there was a flicker in the sky and the dusk had come. In the fifteen minutes in which the boys had put up my bed with its mosquito net and the cook had contrived to dish up chop in a corner of the neglected compound, where a fire now blazed dimly, the very outlines of the building had grown vague and indistinct. Outside the circle of light shed by my small travelling lamp all was blackness, for there was no moon, neither was there any sound in the

darkness save the shrilling of innumerable crickets. But that high shrilling, audible background of all African nights, was incessant.

The lodging I had chanced upon was, so far as I could perceive, the usual long low bungalow containing three rooms entirely separated one from the other, with a broad stoep or verandah running completely round it. There was no need to seek for the key of the end room, where my loads were lodged, and outside which, under the wide eaves, my bed had been set up, for the door had been eaten through and through by white ants, and the lock was gone.

I dined, smoked one short pipe, retired within the semi-privacy of mosquito curtains, and tried vainly to sleep. My boys stole away, black shadows that vanished as they stepped out of the charmed circle of lamp-light, to rest in a tumbledown shelter at the lower end of the compound. I tossed on my

blanket, hot and feverish, tortured by the mosquitoes that the net failed to keep altogether away, thankful a little for the friendly lamplight that battled, if feebly, against the darkness that was to-night actively oppressive, inimical.

There should have been a full moon, but the sky was covered with black and threatening cloud, though the wind of the tornado threatening since the afternoon had not risen. A prowling hyæna howled within twenty yards of where I lay, and I started and trembled, though such devil's laughter was no new sound to me. My nerves seemed all on edge, and I looked for another bout of fever with the morning.

Thoughts, like evil-winged imps, chased each other through my consciousness, half-formed thoughts, strangely terrifying, borne of ill-health and of the darkness. I knew myself for an unwelcome, unfriended stranger in a land where evil stalked abroad more overtly

than in other countries of the world, where the powers of darkness displayed themselves as less intangible and more active. Details of my late host's talk came back to me, stories of the wave of devil-worship that had passed over the very district in whose heart I lay. He had spoken of that priest of darkness whose cunning wit had set the stone of revolution rolling, an old man, hideous in body as in soul, tortured by leprosy into a grotesque caricature of the humanity that he had forsworn. Those grim and terrible scars, so his followers believed, were but the traces of his struggles with lesser devils whom he had encountered and overcome.

Every black man, I thought, worshipped the devil in his heart, for he knew that in this land evil was paramount. Men of the troop led by a young English officer whose name I had forgotten had fled down river terrified when their chief, in his delirium, had rushed from a bed of fever to tragic death by drown-

ing in the waters of the great river. This had happend here, at Kerefi, the town that lay a quarter of a mile below me under the hill. And one man had told wild stories of a ju-ju that the witch-doctor, caught and beheaded, had put upon his executioner. I remembered that in the East they would call that a Sending.

From beyond this chaotic jumble of thoughts some outer influence gave my consciousness a sudden rap. My brain cleared in a second, and I found myself sitting up in bed with all my faculties on the alert. I was listening.

The sound that had caught my attention was that of a fairly large animal moving uncertainly and restlessly, as if its freedom were in some way hampered. It was here in the compound, whatever it was, almost at my elbow. Then a breath of wind, forerunner of the coming tornado, tore the cloud from the face of the moon.

The Resthouse

Before me, in the resthouse compound, stood a hobbled pony.

I looked at it fixedly, and saw that it was assuredly a very real pony. Then there was another traveller who was sharing the hospitality of the resthouse with me. It was odd that I had noticed no traces of him before, but I remembered that it had grown dark almost as soon as I had reached the building, and the thought of examining the other two rooms had not even occurred to me. I looked along the verandah, lit clearly now by the moon, and saw indeed that another visitor occupied the further end. His bed, like mine, had been put up in the verandah itself and his baggage had been piled against the bungalow wall. On the side of one box there stood out clearly in the moonlight the initials E. M. "Edward Machen," I ejaculated, and then I wondered why, for I knew no one of that name. Whereupon it came to me in a flash that Edward Machen was the name of

the young English subaltern that I had been trying hard to recall. That the initials should be the same was a curious coincidence enough.

My unknown companion lay twenty yards away from me, at the least, yet through the half-veil of his mosquito-net I could see that he was as restless as I was myself. He lay quietly for perhaps half a minute, and then started up from his pillow with a violent jerk. Afterwards I heard him muttering—broken, disconnected words and phrases. It was fever, obviously, and he was semi-delirious even now. It was a shame, I thought, that his boys were not watching him. And then the moon was veiled again, and the blackness grew thick as before.

The sounds of restless tossing and muttering died away, and I must have dozed again. I do not know how long it was before I awoke. When I did open my eyes again I found that I was gazing at—a face.

When I say that I was looking at a face I must add that it was a face that I have never tried to describe and never could describe. I can say indeed that it was white, loathly white, and that I knew it to be utterly and abominably evil. It looked, not, thank God, at me, but towards the stranger. I know that if it had looked at me I should have gone mad. And I watched it move towards the other bed till it seemed to pass through the curtain and rest beside the head of that other figure. And I saw my fellow-traveller spring wildly up with a more heart-rending cry of anguish than I had ever imagined in my dreams, though I have often heard it since.

Even as the face of the moon was cleared for a second time the stranger had dashed his mosquito-net aside and leapt from the verandah on to the path that ran down through Kerefi. And as that piteous fugitive fled down the rocky path with something white and loathsome at its shoulder which seemed

striving to peer into its face, the tornado burst. Through a gap in the mantle of cloud shone the pale moon, glimmering behind the driving rain that dashed the tangled grasses in the compound to the earth and beat a devil's tattoo on the resthouse roof.

Then I was filled with an immense pity for that fleeing figure, so that I ran out into the rain just as I was and followed it. The stranger half ran, half jumped, down the rocky path to Kerefi, while I scrambled behind. We reached the sleeping town and were through it. Any noise we made was drowned by the rushing of the mighty rain and the roar of that great wind. And at the bend before we reached the river the figure before me passed out of my sight. A minute, and that cry of horror that had rung out on the resthouse verandah was repeated, and its pitiful echoes died away down the roaring wind. And when I got to the bend I saw

the river before me, and beyond the river, nothing.

* * * * * *

Half an hour later, drenched, shivering, and almost out of my wits, I reached the resthouse compound. I thought of the stranger's pony, but when I looked for it it was not there. I saw the ruin of my own storm-wrecked bed with its broken poles and curtains flapping in wet tatters, and then I stumbled towards the other end of the verandah. There was no sign of a second bed, nor of any baggage, and I saw that the whole of this part of the building had been for months a crumbled ruin, upon which the rain now beat pitilessly.

Wilson

Wilson

HAD become aware that a small negro boy was walking down the sun-scorched path linking the resthouse with the half-dozen sheds of galvanized iron that represented the Ivory Coast Trading Co.'s station. On his shaven head a white envelope, of the shape known as "business note," was balanced adroitly. Without seeming to notice me the child advanced to within two paces of my chair, and held the letter out in my direction. I opened it.

"Dear Sir," it ran, in a flowing clerkly hand, "hearing you are wishful to dispose of 600 12-bore cartridges (mixed 2's, 3's and 4's) I have pleasure in making you an offer for same, Shall be pleased to purchase goods (as per your description) for £2 10s. (two pounds ten shillings). Should you agree

to terms kindly notifiy me at the depôt, or should be pleased to see you if you care to call. Yours ffy, R. Wilson."

I wanted to sell those cartridges badly. There were quite a number of odds and ends which, though they had once seemed necessities, I was indubitably "wishful to dispose of" just at present : two sporting rifles, a shot gun, a camera, and several ingenious electro-plated contrivances that an expensive Piccadilly outfitter had juggled into my possession. They had cost a small fortune six months before. That they now represented the equivalent of a second-class passage home was a matter of grave doubt. I was hard up, and the half-dozen yellow-faced compatriots of mine who now sprawled listlessly on the verandahs of those galvanized iron bungalows knew it. The missionary had been sympathetic, but shooting was not one of his recreations. The Government Agent had a brand-new sporting outfit, but might possibly

relieve me of the camera if I cared to wait till to-morrow, when he hoped to have time to look at it. There remained the traders. The store-clerk, a weedy Liverpool youth, had no acquaintance with arms of precision, was more than a little frightened of them in fact, but rather fancied that his colleague, Mr. Wilson of the shipping department, had lately acquired a second-hand scatter-gun. No, he believed the bargain had not included cartridges, and Mr. Wilson might conceivably be happy to do business with me.

Two pounds ten for the cartridges would be a beginning, if a modest one. Mr. Wilson, or a syndicate of himself and his "colleagues," might even take a fancy to the rifles as well. I slipped half-a-dozen soft-nosed ·404's into my pocket, and resolved that they should hear that yarn about the big sable buck.

I told my boy to bring along the three heavy foil-covered cases—"2's, 3's and 4's—as per your description." He vouchsafed a

sullen obedience, sensing his master's trouble as a dog would sense it. For the last week, I knew, he had been ready to bolt at the first opportunity with as much of my portable property as might constitute a generous recompense for his unpaid wages. His pay was two weeks overdue, so I owed him seven and six. A dog, I meditated, would not have wanted to bolt.

A small figure rose from one of the deck-chairs on the depôt verandah. Mr. Wilson had a long body and very short legs. Legs and body were encased in a much-washed and consequently ill-fitting suit of ready-made ducks of which the original hue might have been either white or khaki. On his bullet head was a huge sun-hat, whose exterior had been recently made dazzling with a coat of white lead. His accent and diction were those of the London office boy.

He was genuinely anxious that my chair should be of the most comfortable and my

drink of the longest and best. He wanted the cartridges—yes—I should be doing him a great favour by letting him have them. He chatted, of palm-oil, of fever and mosquitoes, of Home, which last he visioned, I was to learn, as a doll's-house villa down Bermondsey way, peopled by a mother and sisters whom I could picture tiding over the intervals between mails by enlarging to the neighbours upon the many excellencies of the absent Bob, and by the meticulous dusting, with a sense as of the performance of some religious rite, of the spears and the paddles and the squat idol of black wood that made the Wilson's best parlour a shrine for the spirit of Romance.

"Nuts on curios, the women-folk," he observed. "Pleases 'em more when you smuggle through a box of egret-feathers than to 'ear the company 've risen you ten quid a year."

We talked for an hour. There was no

need to impress Mr. Wilson with a glimpse of the big ·404 cartridges, or even to relate the yarn of the sable buck. He would buy all the guns, if twenty-five quid would cover the lot.

"Six months' screw I've got," he insisted, "lyin' idle. An' 'appen the big blighter kicks too much for a little'un like meself, what price my selling 'er at a profit to the first trader 'oo comes through."

"Orns," he murmured, "'orns over the parlour mantle-shelf. Fair nuts on 'em, they'll be."

He grew so enthusiastic over this vision of himself as a big-game hunter that at the time the fact that he was doing the generous thing towards a fellow-countryman in difficulties hardly occurred to me. His delicacy in handling a rather embarassing situation could not have been excelled. Not once did he betray the slightest sign of any curiosity as to the wherefore of my being at

such a pass, or even of my original reasons for having visited this benighted country.

I liked him, and that in spite of the fact that he was placing me under an obligation to himself. He was a humourist, too, in his own Cockney way, frequently dropping into little droll jokes, breaking into a double shuffle in his wanderings about the verandah, and juggling with imaginary billiard balls.

He escorted me over the premises. In the compound the air was heavy with the sickly odour of palm-oil, and great barrels of it lay in a hundred rows.

That night I dined with Wilson, and he did me remarkably well. And in the morning I knew that I could take the next boat after all, for the Government Agent had decided, on reflection, that the camera might be useful to him. He hardly made a bad bargain, for it had cost me four times what he gave for it.

I took formal leave of Wilson as soon as the fussy little stern-wheeler had churned

herself alongside the trading wharf, and busied myself with getting on board what kit the Fates had left me. But five minutes before the black skipper let the whistle go Wilson's big sun-hat bobbed up from the companion that led to the lower deck. His small retainer followed, bearing an armful of native ivory ornaments, a beautiful pair of carved paddles that I had admired, and a big brass bowl that had been hammered in "bloody Benin." There was also a bottle of whisky from the store, and two tins of tobacco.

"Jist a few curios," he ejaculated, breathless. "You got women-folk, somewhere, I reckon. Fair nuts they are on them bracelets, take it from me. Well, good luck. When you walk up the Strand and spot the Nelson monyiment you'll forgit what a mosquito looks like."

* * * * * *

A week after landing at Plymouth I received a letter from the Government Agent.

Would I mind ordering some more films for him? "You will be sorry to hear," he added, "that young Wilson has pegged out. He went down with fever the night you left, and it proved such a bad dose that his heart wouldn't stand it. A decent little chap."

Bal Masque

Bal Masque

ANCELOT WILKINS felt the keen air of the Northern Heights on his cheek as the gates of the Tube lift clanged behind him. From afar the pilot of a prowling taxi sensed the opulent gleam of patent leather and corded silk, and in five seconds a shadowy W. & G. panted invitingly at the curb.

"Holbein Studios," said Lancelot, as he arranged his swallow-tails with a meticulous precision that came naturally to him.

The car shot uphill for a hundred yards, turned sharply to the left, hummed along a gentle gradient through an avenue of elms, huge and indefinite in the gloom, turned again and crawled slowly and uncertainly along a half-made road flanked by piles of loose

timber and building materials. A low, huddled mass of buildings loomed suddenly at one side of the track. The glare of the headlights disclosed an agent's notice-board emerging unsteadily from a tangle of shrubs. "Studios to Let," it said, and seemed, its mission thus accomplished, on the point of sinking, like Pheidippides, to the earth. The car stopped.

After a careful scrutiny of the register, Lancelot descended, bestowed a shilling on the driver, who received it in absolute silence, and picked his way over various obstructions towards a dark alley that ran lengthwise along the block of studios, whose entrance was revealed by the light of a dim gas-lamp. Lancelot stopped before No. 3.

The hall door, the little window at the side, the great roof-light, betrayed no single hospitable glimmer.

A little puzzled, Lancelot drew a piece of pasteboard from the inside breast pocket of a

natty frock overcoat, and glanced at it closely in the uncertain light.

The card was oblong in shape, with rounded corners and gilt edges. An inscription ran—

MR. LANCELOT WILKINS.

On Friday next,
At half-past eight,
There will be Dancing,
Don't be late.

Mrs. Bindon-Smith,
3, *Holbein Studios,*
Hampstead.

"Heavens!" thought Lancelot; "and to-night's Thursday."

It must be admitted that Lancelot, though very young, betrayed in the ordinary relations of life a precision of action and behaviour that his friends regarded with admiration. Having no experience to speak of, he yet possessed a natural *savoir faire* that few mortals attain to even at thirty-five. In any transaction involving finance he

revealed a certain canniness, though he was neither Scotchman nor Jew. Cab-drivers and crossing-sweepers, to say nothing of husky-voiced gentlemen whose candid lips had sampled neither bite nor sup for three, five or ten days, found him adamant, and though he lent money willingly to his friends he invariably made a note of the occurrence in a neat little morocco-covered note-book, ruled in red ink. It was understood that the book contained no record of a bad debt. Which is all by the way.

Almost for the first time in his young life, Lancelot stood undecided how to act. The fact that he did not look a fool at the present moment was solely due to the absence of spectators.

"My parents," though Lancelot, "live at Wimbledon. This I take to be Hampstead. It is impossible that I should go straight home without either rest or refreshment. But yet, should I discover myself to the Bindon-

Smiths in this condition, I shall indubitably look a fool, if I admit the truth. It occurs to me that I am on my way to a musical evening at my rich aunt's at Highgate, and that I am uncertain whether I ought to come at half-past eight or nine to-morrow."

He was confronted by the face of some small animal, simulated in beaten copper, and screwed to the Bindon-Smiths' front door. From the lower point of its countenance depended a copper ring, with which Lancelot beat upon a conveniently disposed plate of the same metal. There was no opening of doors within, no inner illumination, nor any movement.

Lancelot checked an oath.

The small copper animal detached itself from the woodwork and lay quiescent in Lancelot's hand. He allowed the oath free passage.

His better nature triumphing, he slipped the ring-nosed creature through the letter-box

and walked towards the end of the alley, where the gas-lamp flickered.

"I will go," said Lancelot, "to the 'Empire.'" From which you will understand that he was very young indeed.

A black and vibrant bulk, whose gleaming eyes revealed the half-made road and the distant avenue of trees, still quivered under the lee of the shrubbery.

"Good," said Lancelot; "he hasn't gone yet."

He opened the door and sank into the corner seat. Even as he leant out to direct the figure at the steering-wheel, the car leapt forward.

"Well," said a clear little voice from the opposite corner, "you didn't ask if you might, but you look rather nice, and now you're here you may as well come."

"Good God!" ejaculated Lancelot.

"Oh, then it was your old taxi," said the voice. "I wondered what it was doing here.

I knew the Bindon-Smiths were out to-night, and mine's the only other studio that's let. But he belongs to me now, because he was just vanishing when I found him. And now he's going to Chelsea."

"As you wish, of course—and—I suppose I ought to tell you—my name is Lancelot Wilkins."

"Is it? You needn't have done. Mine isn't Dinah. But you don't look a bit like it. Lancelot, I mean. I do. Mine's Melisande."

And she did. They were already in the avenue, and by the light of the street lamps Lancelot could discern a tiny, almost elfin, figure, draped in a curious gown of gauzy green. She had red-brown hair, and the bearing of a princess from some strange dream-country. Her eyes were red-brown too, and if Lancelot had studied Maeterlinck (whom he had not heard of) he would have visioned her little frail hands as dabbling idly in the waters of a forest pool. At her girdle she wore one damask rose.

"You were never at the Slade, were you?" she asked.

"No," said Lancelot; "I'm in a Government office. I've been there three months. I, at least my department, administer the Ecclesiastical Dilapidations Act, you know."

"No, I don't. Yes, I do, though. The Homes for Decayed Curates, of course. What a pity you aren't in fancy dress. Couldn't you come as a Decayed Curate, don't you think?"

"I fear not. And really—I don't quite know where you're going, but, you know, I haven't been asked."

"Rats! And if you're so fearfully keen on finding out, I'll tell you. We're going to a dance in the great man's studio. There's room for everybody—it's as big as a church."

"What great man?"

"Why, the greatest, of course." She leant forward and breathed, reverentially, a name.

"What's his other name?" asked Lancelot. "I——"

"Oh dear!" she murmured, as her red-brown eyebrows lifted; "and I suppose you've never heard of him."

But they talked, nevertheless, while the car sped south and westward, by Euston Road, Edgware Road, Park Lane, Sloane Street and the King's Road. At the gate of what seemed a builder's yard it stopped. A ragged urchin sprang to open the door. Lancelot jumped out, a tiny hand fluttered for a second in his, and Melisande was beside him. Lancelot gave the driver his legal fare, plus threepence, and declined to recognise the urchin's presence.

"What a dear little ragamuffin."

"Was it? Those chaps are a beastly nuisance. And I don't believe in reckless charity."

Don't you?" she said.

Another taxi, hard on their heels, dis-

charged quite half-a-dozen surprising figures. There was a sheikh, a hunchback, a dreamily handsome Noureddin, two girls in Turkish trousers, Sumurun in an orange veil. She hailed Melisande in the voice of comradeship.

"Shame on you, Pixie, for countenancing shirt-fronts."

"Shut up, Lola. This is Mr. Villikins."

Sumurun nodded. "Ask me for one after supper," she threw over her shoulder to Lancelot, and, flashing black eyes above her veil upon the young merchant, she sped hot-foot up the passage, pausing a dozen yards away to twirl on the toes of tiny slippers before the pursuing Noureddin, kneeling, his arms outstretched in supplication.

"Keep her to that," said Melisande. "Hers is the kind of dancing that you dream about."

They came to a great door, with heavy curtains beyond, between which the light came streaming. Melisande vanished, some one

seized Lancelot's hat and overcoat, and he found himself in a huge room, almost bare of furniture. It was indeed nearly as big as a church. Two great arc-lamps hissed overhead, there was a piano in the far corner, a gypsy violinist, and a Spaniard with a guitar. Leaning with their faces to the wall were pictures, scores of them, and a table by the door was littered with hundreds of drawings. On a model throne piled with Kelim rugs sprawled half-a-dozen men and women in strange dresses, with wild hair and eyes. A bearded man, who seemed to Lancelot the wildest and maddest-looking of the group, rose and greeted him with grave courtesy.

"I hope," thought Lancelot, "he doesn't know I never heard of him before to-night."

Melisande appeared, her arm linked in Sumurun's. She was surrounded immediately by a clamorous crowd of youths that included Noureddin and his companions, a band of Beardsley Pierrots, several Apaches, and a

beautiful Greek in a leopard-skin and sandals.

"A minute, please," she said. "I have responsibilities. What have you done with Mr. Villikins?"

Lancelot advanced.

"Villikins—Everybody," she announced, and the company beamed upon Lancelot, who executed a general obeisance.

Some one signalled to the orchestra in the corner, and the lilting rhythm of Godin's "Septembre" rose on the air. Lancelot, who danced very well, found himself floating down the room with a blue-eyed shepherdess. His face grew flushed, his limbs buoyant. He danced "A Thousand Kisses" with a priestess of Isis, and two-stepped "Ghosts" with an extraordinarily sinuous mermaid. Twice he sought for Melisande, but on both occasions she proved to be dancing with the great man.

Just before supper Lancelot found her. The great man had left Melisande's side, to gabble directions in Romany to the gypsy

with the violin. The good-looking Greek was bearing down upon her, but Lancelot dashed in and won.

Afterwards he could never conjure up any very definite recollections of that dance. He had a hazy remembrance of floating through space with extraordinary ease and lightness, of the touch of a tiny hand on his shoulder, of the dream-perfume of red-brown hair, and the gleam of red-brown eyes that were more than half veiled.

The music stopped,

Lancelot was a little dazed, and by the time he had regained his customary alertness it was not Melisande, but Sumurun, who stood before him.

"I watched you," she said. "Get something cool in glasses, and we'll have the next one if you like."

They drank Spanish wine from a long-necked bottle, and Sumurun's black eyes glittered over her veil. The music had begun again.

"Come," she said.

They danced together once, twice, again and again. The dreamy Noureddin languished in corners, shooting reproachful glance at his mistress when, from time to time, her flashing eyes met his. She laughed, and clung more tightly to Lancelot's shoulder.

The three musicians had left their instruments, and were drinking and chattering volubly to the great man and one or two others. But the spirit of this wild frolic had got well into the veins of most of the youths and maidens present. They danced frantic tarantellas, unaccompanied, and vied one with another in grotesque *pas seuls*. In the middle of the room whirled a dancing dervish. A man and a girl were giving a vigorous and realistic performance of the *danse des Apaches*. The madness infected Lancelot too. He had consumed much Spanish wine, and now extemporised an eccentric measure that met with general approval. There was much

clapping of hands, and a burnoused Arab leapt to the piano-stool and thumped "Villikins and his Dinah" in time with Lancelot's caperings.

The musicians took up their instruments again, and it seemed to Lancelot that the revel went on for hours. He danced every dance, many of them with Sumurun.

Not till the confusion of the general departure did he encounter Melisande again. Weary but still excited figures were disentangling ulsters and cloaks, and two amiable, rather frightened policemen, beguiled from the dulness of point duty in the Kings' Road by some adventurous spirit, were bringing cups of coffee from the nearest coffee-stall. Lancelot seized two, and halted in front of a little figure in green.

"I thought Lola must have carried you off," she said. "Let's go. I'm tired, Villikins."

While she drank her coffee, Lancelot sallied forth and returned triumphantly with

a captured taxi. She settled herself into a corner with a little tired sigh.

Lancelot felt a strange thumping beneath his ribs.

"D'you know," he said, "you only gave me one dance?"

"Never mind; this is a sort of sitting out, isn't it?"

"And you haven't even told me what your other name is."

She leaned back, and tipped up her little elfish chin. Those wonderful eyes, like a moon-fairy's, gleamed between half-closed lids.

"I was born on Sunday," she crooned, "on a Sunday at noon. And I bet you don't know where *that* comes from, do you, Villikins?"

Tiny fingers toyed with the rose at her girdle. It was faded now.

A great wave of blood seemed to rush to Lancelot's temples.

"Give me, oh, give me the rose!" he pleaded.

Melisande shook her head. "I don't believe in—reckless charity," she said.

They were very silent until, somewhere in the region of Covent Garden, the taxi stopped with a jerk. The driver tugged at levers and nuts. and descended, muttering.

Lancelot's head was out of the window. "What's up?" he asked.

"Matter of ten minutes or so, sir. Very sorry. 'Ave 'er all right by then."

Melisande yawned, as fairies would yawn. "Villikins," she began.

"Yes."

"D'you know what the quality in you that I most deprecate is?"

"What?"

"Your essential respectability. I won't accept your cake-walk as characteristic, because you were carousing disgracefully just before you did it."

"Watch this," said Lancelot.

Two yards away an electric standard reared its head twenty feet and more above the curb. Lancelot leapt from the taxi and began to swarm up it. Two or three cabmen and a market porter drew near, curiously. Slowly Lancelot neared the dazzing globe at its summit. Arrived there, the brilliant rays reflected from his irreproachable shirt and waist-coat, he doffed his opera-hat and waved it round his head. "Three cheers for his gracious Majesty King George the Fifth!" he shouted, and his young voice rang like a clarion.

Appreciative plaudits rose from the night birds gathered below, and Lancelot slipped gracefully to earth.

There was a quality in Melisande's smile that marked approval.

"But that," she added, "is not your only fault."

Lancelot blushed. On the outskirts of the little crowd that had collected he descried a greybeard mounting guard over a hand-cart laden with cabbages.

"My good fellow," remarked Lancelot, "yonder cabbages seem to be your property. At what do you appraise their value?"

"That 'ere cart, sir, I've wheeled 'un ten mile to-night. Them cabbages, sir, they'll bring in all o' thirty shillings, or should do."

"I desire to acquire them immediately. Here are two sovereigns. Stay—here is my card. If you care to wheel them a further three miles and plant them all in the front garden of 3, Holbein Studios, Hampstead, before the arrival of the milkman, you shall have another sovereign when you call at my rooms. After all, I owe the Bindon-Smiths something for the knocker."

"Good Villikins," murmured Melisande.

The driver had effected some mechanical conjuration, and once more the throbbing of the engine shook the car.

All too soon, it seemed to Lancelot, they were gliding silently along the dark avenue of elms. Then the half-made road, the untidy piles of planking, the drooping notice-board, reminded him that the end of his adventure was in sight.

The taxi stopped. He stood beside Melisande, and over their heads the gas-lamp flickered, ghostly and ineffectual in the gathering dawn.

Again he felt the rush of hot blood, the thumping at his ribs. His eyes were very bright, his voice uncertain. His native caution had departed from him utterly.

"Melisande," he stammered, "you wont even tell me your real name, but—will you marry me?"

"No," she said. "At least, I don't expect so. But I'll meet you at the Bindon-Smiths.'"

"To-morrow?"

"No. To-night."

Her fingers touched his hand, lingered there for an imperceptible fraction of a second, and she was gone.

Before Lancelot's eyes the roofs and chimneys of Holbein Studios grew suddenly into clear definition against a sky of palest, coldest blue. The leafless trees of the avenue, half-a-mile away, stood out black and vivid, with the sharpness of outline that no object wears save at dawn. The faint pipings of half-awakened birds were carried to Lancelot's ear.

A petal of the rose in his hand fluttered slowly to the ground.

The Butcher

The Butcher

HE first visual impression of the episode that I retain is of a slanting white thread drawn taut against the grey-green background of wooded hills, marking where a stretch of the main road gleamed through the jungle half a mile away. As it caught the eye a low humming, suggesting the flight of some distant insect, obtruded itself upon the noonday hush, and as if to further the illusion something large and yellow slid over the crest and dropped, straight as a bee in flight, to be lost among the nearer trees. A motor car turned almost noiselessly into the enclosure before the travellers' bungalow and drew up below the verandah. Its helmeted and khaki-clad occupant jumped lightly to the ground and walked, with a curiously supple

yet deliberate gait that reminded me somehow of the larger felidae, to the empty room beyond mine, shooting a lowering glance and muttered greeting towards me in passing.

A few quick directions were audible, supplemented by a running commentary of acquiescence in the liquid vernacular of the rest-house keeper, and two servants busied themselves in unloading from the car a kit-bag, an oblong "air-tight," the long bolster of weathered green canvas that suggested a camping outfit, and gun-cases, so many that to observe their portage grew wearisome. Relieved of its freight, the big car was backed into the adjoining stable and I reapplied myself to the report whose leaves had fluttered idly beside my chair during the distraction of these happenings.

An hour of work, and bare feet pattered behind me, while my honour gathered that tiffin awaited his coming. His honour would, as had doubtless been observed, have company.

The Butcher

* * * * * *

During the few days in which he was my only companion I was led more perhaps by circumstances than by inclination to regard Sir John Kesteven not so much in the popular and much abused sense of that *cliché* as a psychological study, but rather as a subject of mental distraction that offered singular and intriguing possibilities of difference from the types of humanity to whose welfare fate had arranged that I should minister. I met few Englishmen, and none on any terms of intimacy. In my experience his type, if it was a type, was new. Once or twice meals found us together, and every evening, I think, we talked from neighbouring long chairs in the verandah. I believe that in those conversations I had hoped to arrive, as far as was perhaps possible, at a fairly reasonable estimate of his character, but am forced to admit frankly that the end found me baffled. There was much in it of the primitive and

much that was nothing of the kind. Acquaintances doubtless knew him as the essential Hunter, but therein they were wrong. The cave-men slew for life, and the means of life. Had he liked Kesteven could have financed a garden city or played Mæcenas to a hundred starving geniuses, his father had seen to that. Neither did his tastes incline, so far as I could gather from his talk, towards trophies, emblems of mortality clamant that it was once life. He stood outside the collecting mania, the accumulation of pelts and horns would, I should imagine, have bored him, and the galleries of Cromwell Road quickened in him no faintest stir of emulation. Something there was in the brawny sleekness of his whole person, in the brutish line of jowl and forehead, that might lead one in an idle moment of imagination to figure him with apron of blue and dangling steel superimposed upon his everyday habiliments of greenish khaki. It was perhaps this fancy, and the

consciousness that search for the exact word was unavailing, that decided the characteristic by which I grew to think of him.

I was to learn from infrequent and almost monosyllabic confidences that could be adduced upon no other topic that his lust for taking life, though it presented itself less as any vulgar passion than as some high quest or misson embarked upon perchance with grave and circumstantial ceremony, was partly congenital. Long before the reference books had taken cognizance of the first John Kesteven, his name and figure were entwined with local myths told and retold over the camp fires of three continents. Yet, in the beginning at least, it seemed that the end and purpose of his slaying had been material. His fortunes, at the period when his multiplying herds had not yet set them, in the fat years before rinderpest and redwater, beyond any risks of an ebbing tide, were based upon a gleaming pile of ivory tusks. Debrett

had laid no curb upon his mania, and the acquaintances of his later life were doubtless led to approve a trait that, through familiarity, they could welcome in one who by betraying more bizarre inclinations might have drawn public attention to the fact that another interloper had thrust within the jealously guarded portals of their order.

This one could arrive at a certain measure of understanding of the younger man, absorbing what little Eton and King's had to give to one of his mentality in place of the initial fight for bread in the wilderness that had helped to stamp a something faintly epic upon the figure of his father. That I who knew him should shrink from any further discussion of his personality is due partly to the fact that occasion allowed me few further hints to go upon and partly that to do so would, I am convinced, call into being an unexplainable impression of being unfair to him.

A memory I have of his walking quietly into the bungalow like a cat after a morning

punctuated at five minute intervals by double reports that came from the direction of the neighbouring tank. I guessed the nature of his quarry when a triangle of black dots had come cleaving over the far tree-tops and three teal, with necks at full stretch, cut a bee-line across the sky to the next water five miles away. All that was left of them, perhaps. In any case there was a kind of hard joy in Kesteven's eyes as he dropped into a chair and took his gun to pieces. Here and there a little fluffy feather adhered to his rough shirt, his putties, and to the thick fell of hair on the backs of his hands. There was blood on one of his boots.

Always his talk was anecdotal, after a fashion, and apart from enquiries as to the possibilities of achievement that might be open to him in the neighbourhood, consisted almost entirely in gruff and lifeless descriptions of former "bags." Here and there his monosyllabic confidences were touched with

a nebulous romance, though only so, I was keen to note, in the secondhand recital of adventures that had befallen his father. One of "the old man's" yarn I have remembered.

"Another time it was an elephant. Not Africa I think—here very likely. Been tracking since dawn, and about noon ran into a funny little cup among the hills. Waterhole. Path between two big rocks. Rounded the nearest—and there stood three elephants, tusker, cow and a calf. Just flapping their ears. The calf was playing with a big jak-fruit. Seen them? Like kittens, or—babies. And just flapping their ears. Then the cow smelt danger and went off up a little ravine like a locomotive. Then the calf, then the bull. Sort of shepherding it. The old man did the devil of a sprint, and took a running shoulder-shot at the tusker. He was a better shot than I am, but the beast was going full tilt, and the bullet, they used miniature cannon balls you know, must have hit one of

his tusks, glanced off, and hit the calf, for the little brute toppled over clear in its tracks.

The bull lumbered round and came for him with ears and trunk at full stretch, trumpeting like the last day. The old man was pretty slick on his feet, and by the time he was out of that cup place and behind a rock the beast had lost him. Stand still and they can't tell you from a tree at fifty yards. If the wind's all right."

I made the comment apparently expected of me, and remarked that it seemed to have been a near thing.

Sir John forcibly concurred, adding, for on this occasion alone he grew loquacious of detail, that the old man admitted having shirked going back for another shot. Something in the air of that retreat among the immemorial hills had spoiled his nerve for the day. "Seemed to sort of belong to the brutes, so it struck him," he explained in extenuation of this single lapse from the

heroic on the part of the old man. "Before Adam, and all that."

* * * * * *

It was barely dawn when I was awakened by movements in the verandah whose cause revealed itself as Sir John, making discriminating choice among his battery of destructive engines.

"License be blowed," he said. "Haven't you spotted this proclamation?" He flashed a hurricane lamp upon a white paper, tacked to the wall, which bore the Government Agent's signature. The public was informed that a male elephant was destroying life and property in the vicinity of the villages thereinbelow enumerated, that the said elephant was thereby certified a "rogue," and that any European resident or native, or any European visitor holding a licence under sub-section D, might essay the destruction of the said rogue elephant without let or hindrance.

I had remembered, and forgotten.

"Why don't you come along?" he said. "Take that 450. Two's safer than one at this sort of game."

I hesitated, and agreed.

* * * * * *

We took two native trackers, and the bungalow was far behind us when the sun topped the hills. For two hours and more we stumbled along the semblance of a path that wound through steamy matted brakes with an occasional clearing, these last a greater weariness to the limbs in that our feet sank at every step over ankle deep into a floor of rotting twigs that snapped with a muffled crackling which was continuous. For myself, to sniff the air of these glades was to call up old pictures of a perspiring child, his memory tingling with treasured passages of Bates and Kingston, treading the glamorous aisles of Kew with hushed and wary feet. We had been mounting slowly, and before the burning rays had shifted their impact from shoulders to

more guarded heads we had worked our path by degrees into a more open country. The sun had climbed high, and the air though hotter was dryer and less exigent of vitality. The tangle of soaring trunks and knotted creepers gave place to a low scrub with here and there a jutting crag of rock, though fifty yards or so was still the limit of our vision. As this horizon widened with our progress I learnt suddenly that we were in the hills, high above our starting point, their great scarps towering up all about us tree-clad almost to the summits. Here and there as we passed a leafy covert where the shade still lingered one saw the swathes of coarse grass bent and flattened, about such spots hanging a musky taint in the air, faint yet penetrating enough, a half-suggested warning to intruding man that here some wild unhuman thing had lately lain couched, to be gone without noise or commotion at his approach.

A bout of stiff rock-climbing brought us

to an easier gradient, where at a corner the path broke away between two rude monoliths of granitic rock. We stood on the brink of a depression, roughly circular, a natural amphitheatre around which grey cliffs sprang to what seemed a great and menacing height. The level floor before us was dotted with loose rocks and covered for the most part with a dry longish grass that appeared to draw little nutriment from its arid bed. It gave a ground-note of a dull ashen colour rather than any shade of green. Faint indications of paths, jungle trackways that instinct told me the coming and going of men had borne no part in fashioning, converged to a tiny pool lying like a dark mirror under the lea of a boulder that some age-old convulsion had flung far out into the centre of the cnp. Facing us was a blur of jungle that seemed to mask a fault or cleavage in the circumference of cliff.

The tracker who led our little procession

stopped with a suddenness that made me jump. The man seemed to quiver where he stood, reminding of the vibrant poise of a pointer. Kesteven held up a deterrent hand and crept forward, clutching his rifle. I gathered that my part for the moment was one merely of watchfulness, of attention. Kesteven, a crouching, grey-green figure, stole nearer to the dark blur of vegetation. A branch cracked somewhere, and there was a just discernible movement in the gloom of leaves a stone's throw away. An effort that strained the eyes served to shift my focus of vision. A vague bulk, suggested by parts only of a seen outline, grew into definition on the shadowy background as if a gauze screen had been there and had been withdrawn. Two huge fans flapped slowly, a great trunk curled up like a plesiosaur uncoiling from the primeval slime. Again there came the sound of a cracking branch.

There was a report whose echoes in that walled space stunned the ears, and Kesteven

had fired. In a second as it seemed he had fired again, whereat he became a little greenish-grey figure that came running, running, towards me and past me, straight for the sentinels of rock that marked the only exit from the amphitheatre where some kind of drama, as it would appear, was being enacted for my benefit.

I was only withdrawn from contemplation of the pathetic absurdity of that little grey-green figure, fugitive from a lumbering bulk that held great fans of ears and twitching trunk aloft and emitted a continuous high and terrible cry—"Trumpets of Michael and Azrael," I murmured—by remembering that some one had called or spoken in my ear.

That was it. I must shoot.

There was a third report, but its echoes were still ringing when Kesteven, who had reached to within arm's length of the rocky threshold, caught his foot in some obstacle hidden in the dry grass, and stumbled.

The Butcher

The grey bulk of what suggested itself to me in that moment as some dread monster-god of old Assyria lurched forward, and limbs like granite pillars pounded with a horrid kneading motion upon an untidy huddle of grey-green and crimson pulp.

As a scream that began by being human fluttered off into a strange little whinnying sound that seemed to come from somewhere infinitely far away, and which I took to be Kesteven's soul beating its way up and beyond those craggy heights, I became violently sick, though my eyes were now fascinated by the little wisp of smoke which, scarcely perceptible, curled snakily from the barrel of my dropped rifle.

The City of Dreadful Noise

The City of Dreadful Noise

HE East, we were once informed by a literary acquaintance of equal insight and fancy, was an invention of the nineteenth century, an expression, not of philosophy, of geography, but of temperament, a dream, in short, that had led many to leave their people for its people, their homes for its desert tents, in an effort, it might be, to turn its conventions into realities. It was a dream, he would have it, made possible by the discovery of local colour. Vulgarized by the rude touches of many fingers, its glamour has all but departed, but not before it has caught some of us and whisked us out of our proper orbit, leaving us writhing, like jettisoned starfish, in hot discomfort beneath alien rays.

The City of Dreadful Noise

Bastard Orient though it may be, Colombo, chief city of the Serendib whose beauties were detailed of yore by no less a chronicler than the Princess Scheherazade, has its sights, its scents, its sounds, of which, albeit we contemned them before they had time to become familiar, the memory will be always with us. Of these, sights have in an age of picture post-cards lost their essential quality, and the cinema has established the matter beyond recall. Scents will speak only to the crude and barbaric spirit, their devotees haunt the half-world and the hair-dresser's shop. It is the ear that is the gateway to the inner courts of the soul, and only the sounds of our exile that will ever remind us of it. It is only in the watches of the night moreover that they become really manifest, only from a wakeful couch that one can savour their true essence. London or Paris with the very sounds of the night are wont to lull their citizens to slumber. It is with the near-by

drone of the motor-bus and the taxi and the far-away subterranean purr of the "tube" train that these stony-hearted step-mothers sing their sons to sleep.

The paths by which we fare to the land of Nod lie, however, through other and less pleasant places. We like it may be to get to our office (if we have an office) early in the morning, wherefore we spread our tent beside one of the main thoroughfares that radiate from the Fort. Each eve, a short hour or two after sundown, we seek our well-earned pillow. Sleep, the jade, eludes us for a spell, hovers irresolute, trembles on the verge of surrender—then starts and flees in horror. A shrieking sisterhood of grass coolies have plunged without a moment's warning into the eldritch music of a Witches' Sabbath, and that at our compound gate. As souls not wholly lost they quaver off into silence after a brief hour or so. Thereafter a respite, broken only by Ramasamy, good jovial wight, who joins with his mates in

a corroboree held in the centre of the highway. His song, albeit it lasts a little longer than that of his aunts and grandmothers, is less inhuman if slightly more alcoholic. He concludes with the Tamil National Anthem. But the entertainment is not over, and the next turn reveals itself as a troupe of highly trained pariahs who, squatting in a half circle, beguile the listening ear with the sad songs of their own native plains. There is peace again even for another half hour, when a stealthy footstep crunching the gravel beneath our window draws us silent-footed to that coign of vantage. Good, 'tis Ramlan, our favourite constable, faithful fellow, though opportunity does betimes cheat him of an arrest by a bare five minutes or so. Yet he and his minions have our welfare at heart, signing a book that rests upon the stable shelf in witness thereof three times between sunset and cock-crow. He is gone, and a gecko chirps blithely from the rafters to cheer him

on his way. A bandicoot drops softly to the wash-stand, removes the lid of the soap-dish, and daintily regales himself with a light supper of Brown Windsor. On the ledge outside the window a ridiculous monster that boasts two rusty fretsaws as hind legs gently scrapes one upon the other as a love-song to his mate. He sleeps at length, the world sleeps, we sleep, until a soft patter on the roof grows to a roar, a warning plop on one corner of the matting is taken up and reechoed, once, twice, many times, and a sequence of drops rushes through a crescendo to a cascade that impinges relentlessly upon seven points of our only authentic Persian carpet.

The Dissawe's Daughter

The Dissawe's Daughter

T was Christmas Eve.

But how different in Ceylon from in the old homeland.

No snow, no frost, no holly and mistletoe, no dear old Santa Claus to steal into your bedroom at dead of night and fill your stocking with sweeties, dollies, puff-puffs and rocking-horses.

So although it was Christmas Eve Podinona, the Dissawe's lovely daughter, was not rubbing her dainty little nose on a frosted window-pane and listening for the postman's knock. Far otherwise was the scene, for, in a secluded chamber of her father's old-world mud palace, the dusky daughter of a long line of Kandyan kings sat gazing idly from her unglazed window upon the rolling acres of golden paddy fields that swept up well-nigh to the walls of the Dissawe's stronghold.

From one soft brown hand depended a. shining disc of white metal, dexterously fashioned by some cunning native artificer from an old corned-beef tin, and curiously wrought and graved upon the reverse surface with runes and mottoes from the legends of her race. It was Podinona's mirror, and ever and anon she raised it from her lap and looked long and lingeringly into its depths. What did she see there I wonder? Was it ought but the ravishing image of her own half-laughing, half petulant little face? Or was some dim presage of the future mirrored there?

It was a charming picture that the Dissawe's daughter made, as she sat cross-legged in an exquisitely oriental pose, the soft contours of her girlish figure, unrestrained by any Western monstrosity of steel or whalebone, swathed gracefully in a gorgeous *saraband* (shirt-waist) of flamingo-coloured silk. Her thick black tresses, delicately

fragrant with the faint yet languorous aroma of the coconut, were sleeked neatly back to be coiled in a demure but shapely knot at the nape of her slender neck. Priceless necklaces and bracelets of uncut rubies, emeralds, sapphires, and topazes, were clasped about the same little neck and wrists of equal slenderness.

Podinona trifled idly with the mechanism of a huge gramophone that stood at her elbow upon the floor of the apartment, and the strains of a favourite Western melody filled the room, striking an oddly incongruous but not unpleasant note in a setting that was typically Eastern.

"Itchy-ku, Itchy ku," echoed Podinona.

"But no, I cannot like these European love-songs. I do not understand them." And with a wilful movement the haunting music was stilled.

Once again she sought her mirror.

"They tell me I am beautiful," she murmured, "and yet I—I have no lover. True, there is Punchi Sinho, the Ratemahatmaya's nephew, but I hate him, he is so ugly and so rough. I fear my father wills that I should wed him, but I will never, never do it. Nor shall I ever, methinks, behold a man of my father's people upon whom I could look with favour. Strange, strange would it be, if fate should give me a lover from the race of white men who rule our land, and of whom I have heard tell that they are bold, brave and beautiful above the common run of mortals. It shall be, I will it. The man of my heart shall be of these Englishmen!" And Podinona clapped her little hands with glee.

The curtain before the door was lifted, and a wizened old ayah sidled into the apartment.

"*Aiyo*, *aiyo*, little one," she croaked, "what has pleased thy sweet heart that thou shouldest sing and exult for the joy that is

upon thee? See, I have, cooked for thee a dish of the little coconut *kutties* (fairy cakes) that thou lovest."

"I thank thee, for all that I am no longer a child to fix my desires upon such trifles. But listen then, Alicehamy. It has come to me that I shall meet a white man of the race that rules our people such as thou hast told me of, and that he shall love me and that we marry. Then shall my English lover take me far over the sea to those strange cities that my father speaks of, and I will learn to sing the English love-songs such as this engine holds, but which I do not as yet fully understand. Is it not a good thought, old Alicehamy?"

"*Tchi, tchi*, little one, it is a bad thought and not becoming to thee. Evil is wrought from such idle dreaming. Let not thy father hear aught of this foolish tale. Punchi Sinho—"

"Enough!" broke in the indignant damsel. "Leave me. I would be alone."

Rising with a swish of gorgeous draperies, the high-born daughter of Lanka followed her dismissed duenna through the curtained doorway, tripped along the corridors of the Dissawe's palace to the crude but massive gateway of baked mud, and thence along the hundred yards or so of rough cart-track that lay between the palace and the great tank, whose waters fed her father's fruitful domain. Upon a rock, shaded by a giant mango tree whose mammoth trunk towered two hundred feet and more into the air, she sat and dreamed, gazing into the deep pool beneath, that was dappled with purple lotuses.

Her favourite haunt in moments such as these, Podinona would sit here for hours, telling all her secrets to the lotus buds.

It was a fitting shrine for the birth of Romance.

Even as Podinona dreamed, a noise far down the path brought her wandering

thoughts back from the fairy-land of imagination with disconcerting suddenness. Startled from her reverie, she gazed down the track and beheld, approaching at a rapid gallop, a a bullock cart from the box seat of which the driver handled with airy nonchalance the reins of a four-in-hand team of fiery bulls.

Even before Podinona could take in the details of the stranger's figure, the vehicle was upon her, and its owner, reining back the spirited animals upon their foam-flecked haunches, sprang lightly to the ground, sweeping an immaculate pith helmet from a carefully brushed head of golden curls in courtly obeisance.

Podinona clenched tiny hands against her beating heart. The stranger was surely none other than the hero of her dream. Tall and willowy, his curly hair as brightly yellow as the ripe paddy-fields of her father's *totum* (farm), his bold yet kindly eyes of a bewitching china-blue, faultlessly attired in pink shirt,

crimson cummer-bund, stripped flannel trousers, and spotless tennis shoes, he smiled down upon her, a very demigod.

"Say, kid," asked Jack Hargreaves (for he it was, the young official whose short but brilliant career of some eighteen months in the service had focussed all eyes at the Colonial Office upon him), "hast seen a *podian* (page-boy) pass this way? I told the little devil to meet me here, what."

"Nay, *dorai* (Mr.)," came the shy response, "but if it chance that thy servants have failed thee sure am I that my father, the good Dissawe, will esteem it an honour to extend thee every hospitality. And I (she wriggled a chubby little foot)—will beguile thee so that the hours of thy visit shall not seem long. I will show thee my pet tortoise. And stay, thou wilt even expound to me the English love-songs with which my singing-box makes music. But why hast thou left the city for this jungle village?"

"A shootin' trip, little girl. No use being a heaven-born if you can't get a week's leave, what." Smiling, the young administrator tapped the breach of the heavy double-barrelled rifle which he carried jauntily in the hollow of his arm.

High above them a large snipe circled slowly in the air.

With the ease borne of long practice, Hargreaves brought his gun to the ready and discharged both barrels simultaneously, a trick he had excelled in since his college days. Wounded in a vital spot, the great bird fluttered to their feet.

"*Maho Mahondi* ! (Bravo ! Bravissimo !)" exclaimed Podinona, and clapped her little hands.

"Tis nothing," ejaculated the young official. "In my country—But see, here comes the old chief. You must introduce me, what."

* * * * * *

A week had passed.

A week that for Podinona had seemed but one brief hour of exquisite delight, and even for Jack Hargreaves, who knows, may have vanished all to quickly. Not only snipes but many other denizens of the neighbouring jungle had fallen to Jack's gun during the daylight hours, while in the evenings the old Dissawe, who seemed to have taken an immense fancy to his guest, played pitch and toss or nap with the erstwhile haughty young civilian, and Podinona worked the gramophone, hung upon the occasional smiles of her lover, and was happy, happy as the day was long. Even the grim old aristocrat her father was not ill-pleased, finding the open-handed devil-may-care young Englishman an easy prey at the gaming table. Steadily the pile of his winnings mounted, from five to ten, from ten to twenty and, by the last night but one, even to twenty-five rupees. Night after night the old Dissawe had dropped off at last into slumber, his lean

fingers clutching the pile of I. O. U's and cheques which his visitor had tossed over the table with such *insouciant* recklessness. And then, what walks beneath the moon, what sweet whisperings in the shadow of the mango beside the lotus pool.

Yes, Podinona had been happy.

And Hargreaves, what of him?

Who can doubt that happiness had been his after a fashion, marred perchance by fleeting memories of another figure with whom he had cavorted, how often was it, surely not *too* often, upon the tennis courts of Colombo? And yet—

* * * * * *

It was a week since Podinona had dreamed by the lotus pool, and had wakened from that dream to what seemed another life.

As on those other days he had sallied out, gun in hand, at noon, but since then long hours had passed and now the moon's face was mirrored in the lotus pool, and still he came not.

Shunning even the old chieftain's companionship, she had stolen out to be alone by the pool with her grief. Perchance he was dead, slain by some savage beast. Perhaps, an alternative equally terrible, he had wearied of her and passed out of her life as suddenly as he had come.

"*Aiyo*," she sighed, "*Aiyo*!"

A harsh voice croaked from the path above, and sent Podinona's heart into her mouth.

"Well may'st thou mourn"—the rasping voice was her father's—"Well may'st thou mourn for a lover false, fleeting, perjured, and white-faced as this accursed one whose countenance thou shalt never see again."

"Father, father!" she cried. "What has happened?"

"See, the faithless one," snarled the old man, stretching forth a lean hand in which a crumpled paper was discernible. "His smile was false, and from the first I suspected the

mockery in his heart. The very cheque that thou mayst have marked he threw over the table so airily six nights ago, when, by skill alone, I had vanquished him in fair combat, I sent not eight hours later by a swift runner to the bank. See now, the self-same cheque : there is written, 'Not provided for.' See for thyself."

"It is not true, it is not true!" moaned Podinona. "He has not, cannot, have left me thus. Thy money was naught, and methinks thou knowest the backs of those cards too well, for hast thou not told me our ancestors were wont often to play therewith, even for three generations."

"Wicked and shameless one, thou hast loved the accursed stranger, and thou must die!" snarled the infuriated old man, whipping from his belt even as he spoke a heavy *cadgan* (bowie-knife), and flourishing the glittering blade above his daughter's head.

"Death indeed shall be my lot," cried

the daughter of kings, "but not at thy hands, O cruellest of fathers!"

"A second, and the old chief stood alone upon the rock, while from the pool below came a dull, sickening splash.

* * * * * *

And even as the wily crocodile trailed sluggishly to his lair beneath the lotuses to digest his Christmas dinner, Podinona's white lover crouched, with a look upon his handsome features that was half nervousness and half relief, upon a corner seat in the Colombo night mail. Kicking an expensive kit-bag into place beneath him, he disappeared behind an outspread copy of the ***Times of Ceylon.***

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